

# “SportaRobbie” Slash in The LazyTown Community

## Fanfiction’s Function to Liberate Queer Individuals

[CLAIRE PARDUS]

Upon considering the purpose of fanfiction, whether it be to inform, to entertain, to persuade, a combination of these or otherwise, I would posit that very few individuals would turn to a children’s show’s fandom in order to find such answers. After all, shows like LazyTown have been off the air since 2014 and have little to no cultural relevance besides inciting nostalgia for people who grew up in the 2000s. However, this television series has taken a different life online through meme compilations to artwork magazines and, arguably the most blossoming iteration, written work and fanfictions. This can be said true for a majority of online fandoms, where artists take the content they are presented with and create vastly diverse settings, scenarios, and character backgrounds that pave the way for marginalized groups such as queer-identifying individuals to be able to flourish and express themselves without the looming threat of the patriarchy. While fanfiction has been previously argued by critics, specifically by Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg<sup>1</sup>, to broadly liberate general minorities from the patriarchy, I believe that it has evolved and has shifted towards aiding queer individuals more than women and feminine-identifying individuals. Through a case study of a fanfiction from the LazyTown fandom, I argue that the manifest function of fanfiction has shifted away from the private, domestic sphere of women to function as a sphere for queer individuals. To analyze this claim, I will first explore what has previously been studied in fanfiction as a whole and its influences on liberating queer identities. This will be followed with introducing my methodology, which includes concepts such as escapism, gender as a performance, and radical feminism. Finally, I will delve into a selected text from the LazyTown fanfiction library listed on the website “Archive of Our Own” (AO3) to evaluate and uphold this assertion.

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1 Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg, “Convergence Culture and the Legacy of Feminist Cultural Studies,” in *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4-5 (2011): 566-584.

The LazyTown fandom has existed on the platform AO3 since 2006, and has grown exponentially throughout the years as more intricate, elaborate, and detailed fanfictions have been written and published. One of the more sizable stories published on AO3 that falls under the Lazytown fandom is “Definition of Insanity” written by user xByDefault<sup>2</sup>. This lengthy fanfiction, a whopping 170,500 word story, features characters from the television series such as Sportacus, Robbie Rotten, and Stephanie, as well as original characters conceived by the author. The work was first uploaded to AO3 in June of 2020 and was marked “completed” by the author on August 13, 2022. At the time of this article, “Definition of Insanity” boasts a total of 37 chapters, 758 comments left by previous readers, 560 “kudos,” (a system in which readers can express their liking to an author’s work), and 58 bookmarks from registered users on the AO3 platform.

The fanfiction follows an alternative storyline from what is usually depicted in the television series (that being child-friendly narratives, singing, teachable lessons etc.) and follows Sportacus’ perspective as Robbie Rotten, the town’s self-proclaimed villain, destroys Sportacus’ airship and forces him to become a ground resident of the town. As the fanfiction is lengthy, the story takes many turns and plot twists that engage other characters from the LazyTown universe in ways that the show does not. This change can be primarily seen from Ms. Bessie Busybody acts as a maternal mentor to Sportacus as he resolves his feelings for Robbie Rotten, but is also evident with side characters such as Pixel and Mayor Meanswell. While the former is depicted as more mature and intelligent as opposed to being a stereotypical “tech-wizard child,” Mayor Meanswell is swapped from having a clueless personality to having significantly more common sense and situational awareness. This fanfiction diverges from the canonical LazyTown universe through its inclusion of magic. Robbie is part fae or fairy, and his powers are shown through his plethora of disguises that he engages in to help fix his wrongdoings towards Sportacus. The new perspective on the television show’s pre-existing narrative, the expression of queer identity through the Sportacus/Robbie relationship, and the inclusion of magic are actively present in this fanfiction as the two are brought together from these forces and, after navigating several hardships, are happily in a relationship.

Critics and scholars of fanfiction have argued its importance in the queer community, especially through creating a heterotopia for queer individuals through remaking cisgender and heterosexual narratives, inclusion of queer and transgender expression, as well as the use of alternative universes. Diana Floegel suggests in a 2020 pilot study that queer creators within the realm of fanfiction reorient cis/heteronormative narratives perpetuated by the entertainment industry and, as a result, design fictional systems and create communities that help fill gaps of “queer

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<sup>2</sup> xByDefault. “Definition of Insanity.” *Archive of Our Own*, June 26, 2020. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/24921043>.

erasure and misrepresentation”<sup>3</sup>. In a similar fashion, Anna Llewellyn collected survey data from women-loving women and found that one of the more prominent results was that “online fanfictions are places where queer is normalized,” offering a sense of community that is otherwise not offered through participant’s real worlds<sup>4</sup>. Jonathan A. Rose explores the influence that fanfiction has on those who identify as queer or transgender, specifically the latter within the Sherlock Holmes fandom. “Transfic not only provides an opportunity to add trans to the possible readings and meanings of a text but also becomes a means of ‘transing’ narratives, strengthening the position of trans readings as valid creative engagements and as a form of trans agency”<sup>5</sup>. Jennifer Duggan adds to this in a 2022 study that repealed the pre-existing notion that the majority of “slash” fanfiction audiences, fanfiction that ships two or more fictional characters together, were adult cisgendered women, exploring genderqueer and transgender adolescents and how they are influenced and supported by fanfiction as it is a “gateway to real-life queer communities.”<sup>6</sup> Alternative universes and situations are also employed within fanfiction, and, according to Kavita Mudan Finn and Jessica McCall, “is the beginning of a new kind of criticism” to “preserve the multiplicity and complexity of meaning in the text,” which can include queer undertones<sup>7</sup>. All of these critics of fanfiction, as well as many others, generally conclude that fanfiction has undoubtedly had a positive influence on those who identify outside of the cisgender, heteronormative patriarchy that exists today as it liberates them to express their identities and feelings in a virtual community that embraces one another.

To reiterate my claim, I pose that the newfound aim of fanfiction in modern day media is to liberate queer individuals from existing patriarchal oppression. As a critic to the texts that will be analyzed as well as to the fanfiction community in a grander sense, it is important to establish where my credentials and ties with the community lie and, hence, may make themselves present within the analyses that follow. I am not an active fanfiction writer, but rather an avid reader, with much of my focus in years past in the LazyTown community among others. The texts that have been selected for analysis, under my feminist ideology and theoretical approaches, are ones that I had read previously for leisure and have decided to revisit for the sake of shedding light on a community that would otherwise be dismissed as being small and insignificant. As these are texts that I have read previously without the current methodology employed, I acknowledge that there

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3 Diana Floegel, “‘Write the Story You Want to Read’: World-Queering through Slash Fanfiction Creation,” in *Journal of Documentation* 76, no. 4 (2020), 797.

4 Anna Llewellyn, “‘A Space Where Queer Is Normalized’: The Online World and Fanfictions as Heterotopias for WLW,” in *Journal of Homosexuality* (2022), 2357, 2358.

5 Jonathan A. Rose, “‘My Male Skin’: (Self-)Narratives of Transmasculinities in Fanfiction,” in *European Journal of English Studies* (2020), 33.

6 Jennifer Duggan, “‘Worlds. . .[of] Contingent Possibilities’: Genderqueer and Trans Adolescents Reading Fan Fiction,” in *Television & New Media* (2022), 715.

7 Kavita Mudan Finn and Jessica McCall, “Exit, Pursued by a Fan: Shakespeare, Fandom, and The Lure of the Alternate Universe,” *Critical Survey* 28, no. 2 (January 2016), 29.

are instances where conclusions and assertions that I make are pre-existing and are therefore reinforced by said methodology. It should also be mentioned that I, as an individual, do not identify as queer; I identify as a heterosexual, cisgender woman, and my perspective and arguments made in relationship to the queer community may not, and rightfully so, be deemed credible due to a lack of personal association. As I am taking an outsider's look into the representation of those who identify differently than myself, I understand that I lack the lived experience of those who are represented in the text. Rather, my understanding of the text is rather logical and evaluative. Finally, it should be noted that while these texts reflect the marginalized groups of gender identity and sexuality, the cast of characters is predominantly white or caucasian. My intention is to further research the LazyTown fanfiction community and the fanfiction as a whole to better understand who utilizes it, how it creates ties and relationships between members of their respective communities, and what impacts it has beyond the digital sphere into the real, physical world.

Moving to theoretical approaches to be applied in the analysis, I pose three central scholarly theories that are resonant within fanfiction as a whole. Firstly, Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg pose a concept of escapism within fanfiction texts. As defined by their study, fanfiction "becomes a means of coping with alienating real life pressures," such as but not limited to the pre-existing patriarchy, and provides an "escape from dominant gender expectations"<sup>8</sup>. This concept has been applicable to anyone who is not supported by the patriarchy, including women and people of color, but is arguably most applicable to queer individuals. In a society that has been especially progressive in recent years, such as the United States, a standard for all people to identify a certain way rather than another even when other identities are said to be "accepted" still exists. For those who fall outside the box of being cisgender or straight, fanfiction is argued to provide an outlet for said individuals to not only manage external forces that may degenerate and discredit their identities, but provide a means of self-expression. Escapism exists to aid marginalized groups under a patriarchy through self-expression, and in the context of this analysis its influence on supporting queer identifying persons will be of most interest.

Secondly, Victoria Leto DeFrancisco and Catherine Helen Palczewski suggest theories that can also be applied to fanfiction and its service to supporting queer identities, the most relevant for this discussion being their consideration of gender as a performance. They suggest that "individuals participate in the construction of their personal and group identities through daily enactments, or citations, of gender/sex."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, therein underlies "the power of seemingly unconscious performances of seemingly unimportant norms" that perpetuates gender identity

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8 Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg, "Convergence Culture and the Legacy of Feminist Cultural Studies," 569, 573.

9 Victoria Leto DeFrancisco and Catherine Helen Palczewski, "Alternative Approaches to Understanding Gender/Sex," *Communicating Gender Diversity: A Critical Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 53.

within a culture.<sup>10</sup> Rather than gender being an established identity that an individual carries with them throughout life and society, it is something that continually evolves. While fanfiction is reserved for a more private sphere of interaction that is separate from interpersonal public connection, it certainly reflects the influences of such interactions and can uphold as well as deconstruct such identities. Fanfiction can ultimately serve as a reflection as well as a critique of gender in a society, and by implementing this theory into the analysis of the text we can better understand how queer individuals are better supported and acknowledged through fanfiction.

Thirdly, the use of radical feminism when analyzing fanfiction can aid in understanding where the patriarchy's influences reside and how fanfiction seemingly turns it on its head. According to Deanna D. Sellnow, radical feminism is one of many feminist perspectives that specifically focuses on identifying and responding to the system of patriarchy and how it "creates men and women differently."<sup>11</sup> Radical feminism "reveal[s] how objectifying hegemonic beliefs and behaviors based on sex, gender, or sexual orientation are reinforced or challenged in some way."<sup>12</sup> As the goal of radical feminism is to expose hegemony, or the ideology of the dominant class in a society such as the patriarchy, as well as consciousness raising, this perspective can be applied to fanfiction as it arguably articulates experiences and perspectives that do not fall in line with dominant ideology. Fanfiction can be a platform where ideas, identities, and expressions that are not cisgender or heteronormative can identify, thus giving relevance to radical feminism within fanfiction text. This will be applicable to the analysis as the incorporation of non-dominant ideology sheds light on what is socially acceptable.

One of the primary purposes of xByDefault's fanfiction *Definition of Insanity* is to illustrate the blossoming of Sportacus' and Robbie's friendship and their subsequent romantic relationship. It is worth starting with the concept of escapism from my methodology to illustrate how their relationship comes about and is perceived by others in the fictional text. The undertones of romantic and sexual interest are present in the fanfiction prior to Sportacus directly stating that he identifies as gay. Yet the moment is not discussed in great detail both by the characters nor the author. Sportacus' moment of clarity ends Chapter 19 and Robbie's admission follows near the start of Chapter 20.

"But, what about you? You, uhm, you had a pretty strong reaction after I told you.' This was awkward and he was making it so on his own, he knew it. Addressing the elephant in the room always was. 'About me being gay?'

'Oh, that,' Robbie said. A minute stiffness in his movements, before he waved at

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10 Victoria Leto DeFrancisco and Catherine Helen Palczewski, "Alternative Approaches to Understanding Gender/Sex," 53.

11 Deanna D. Sellnow, "Feminist Perspectives," *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013), 144.

12 Sellnow, 145.

Sportacus, laughing brightly. 'No, no, good for you, I guess. Good for me, good for us all...' he trailed off. There was that twitching of his nose and worrying of his lower lip again. ... 'You took me by surprise, think nothing more of it. Though, I suppose that I could've handled that a little differently.'

'I've had worse reactions.' Not quite a lie but a modification to make Robbie more at ease. Sportacus didn't say anything if he didn't feel it [was] safe. Almost as how he kept his ears hidden.

Almost.

'Oh, yeah,' Robbie replied, 'ditto'<sup>13</sup>.

It should be noted that this revelation sets the stage for their relationship to truly begin blossoming within the text and ultimately culminates into their romantic confessions later in the fanfiction. Neither Sportacus or Robbie Rotten express distaste or hatred for the other for identifying differently than they initially perceive.

A moment that is similar in idea but at a smaller scale, both figuratively and literally, is the narration providing information on how the children of LazyTown perceive their relationship. With the exception of Stephanie, the children in the television series are puppets with humanistic qualities and actions in this text that gives them child-like individuality and human consciousness. A quote that sums their understanding and interpretation of the relationship is found near the end of the fanfiction as Sportacus hosts a housewarming party and spends most of his time at Robbie's side. "Stingy and Ziggy appeared oblivious, but at least Stephanie and Pixel were alright with it as his spoken statement"<sup>14</sup>. The only child out of the LazyTown bunch that seems to be aware and not completely supportive is Trixie, but this can be disregarded as Trixie is known as the trickster and the rebel of the group. Generally speaking for both the television show as well as the fanfiction community, her character is understood to be quite stubborn when learning new things. Thus, we can assume that for the most part, there is a general acceptance of their relationship.

The casualty of how these fictional characters react to Sportacus coming out sheds light on the sense of escapism that the author employs in the fanfiction. The normalcy in which each character, especially Robbie following Sportacus' admission, deviates from the hegemony of the western patriarchy as it reflects a general understanding and gentle acceptance of queer identity that is rarely present in the real world. As the stigmas and pre-existing gender norms pressure individuals to identify a certain way (i.e. cisgender and heterosexual), fanfiction allows readers who identify with these characters an outlet for escapism.

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13 xByDefault, "Definition of Insanity," *Archive of Our Own* (2020), Chapter 20.

14 xByDefault, Chapter 36.

While the element of escapism provides an outlet for expression within fanfiction, the role of gender as a performance as procured by DeFrancisco and Palczewski offers similar liberties to those engaging with the text. Enter Mimosa Rochas, one of Robbie Rotten's many magical alternate personas as he works to rectify the inciting incident he had caused and make things right with the town's hero. A real estate worker with a keen eye to interior design, she offers her services to Sportacus while subtly prying at personal and rather intimate details under the guise of flirtatious conversation. The introduction to Mimosa paints a hyper-feminine picture of who this strange woman is all about:

"Out of the large white van, a tall woman with permed bristly blonde hair in shoulder length had stepped out, somewhat wobbling on the uneven ground with her stiletto heels ... [and] sashayed towards him. Her hips moving in a pendulum with each step. She was tall, but the heels made her downright loom over him as she neared.

She had an oblong face that was covered in heavy make-up, her lips seemingly thinner by the deep red lipstick and her long lashed eyes obscured by a pair of cherry cat eye glasses"<sup>15</sup>.

As the character of Mimosa Rochas claims to be an interior designer, her assistance with Sportacus' housing situation leads to awkwardly intimate conversations wherein Mimosa/Robbie attempts to "figure out" Sportacus' romantic interests while presenting as an extremely feminine individual. Of course, Robbie Rotten's identity is finally revealed as Mimosa and Sportacus get into a quarrel, but her character briefly serves to contrast the more masculine Robbie.

Robbie Rotten's appearance within the LazyTown television series universe is not the ideal of heteronormative masculinity in comparison to Sportacus' muscled and well-toned physique, a sentiment that is certainly reflected within xByDefault's text. While the story gives a brief description of the characters and setting, there is one instance following Robbie's "coming out" where he directly makes commentary on his own appearance as failing to be "masculine":

"Have you seen me?" he gestured to himself waving his hand all over and around his face with a finishing flick. 'I knew that you were ignorant, but for real, where exactly did I go so wrong that I made you think that I'm straight?!

Sportacus couldn't help but laugh. 'Alright, I'm sorry. I'm not ignorant, I just wanted to be sure.'"<sup>16</sup>.

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15 xByDefault, "Definition of Insanity," Chapter 19.

16 xByDefault, "Definition of Insanity," Chapter 20.

Robbie's appearance moving into the final chapters of the fanfiction is something to acknowledge as an example of the performativity of gender and its role within fanfiction. As the romantic relationship between Sportacus and Robbie comes to fruition in the final chapter, we witness characters such as Ms. Bessie Busybody commenting on Robbie Rotten's appearance. At a party being hosted at Sportacus' newly-furnished house, Bessie pulls Sportacus to the side and mentions to him her observance of Robbie wearing lipstick, something that her tone suggests was unlike him previously<sup>17</sup>. It should be clear to the reader at this point of the fanfiction's narrative that Robbie Rotten's physical appearance served a function in telling a story in his outward appearance towards others and how it correlates with his self-perception as a gay man.

DeFrancisco and Palczewski suggest that gender is a performance rather than an inherent trait<sup>18</sup>, and this is proven to be true through Robbie Rotten's own expression of gender in this particular fanfiction. Under the disguise of Mimosa Rochas, Robbie emanates, or at least attempts to emanate, his understanding and learning of what it means to present oneself as feminine. It should also be noted that the subtle notes of Robbie failing to walk properly in these high heels as well as his constant remarks about his feet hurting suggest that this interpretation of femininity is not comfortable for him. The physical struggle that Robbie endures to accurately represent himself in both suppressed and unsuppressed manners serves as a critique on how the real world makes those who are in Robbie's shoes, those who don't identify within a culture's hegemony of gender expression, are often unable to stand against those influences. The presentation of feminine traits sheds light on how gender is performed within the text, and how it lacks rigid categories to fall under, arguably making the narrative a liberating space for those who fall out of the "approved" gender expressions within a heteronormative society.

The radical feminist perspective is indeed applicable to fanfiction, particularly through the use of magical and folkloric elements and their parallels to sexuality. As this fanfiction takes on the interpretation that Sportacus is a "sports elf," there are stereotypes which suggest that elves are not only accepted as being real, but are also looked down upon. Sportacus shares this part of his identity with Stephanie, a human girl from the television show. Stephanie is characterized as being young and innocent, but demonstrates the quality of a leader and often looks up to Sportacus as a role model. After Sportacus suggests that he should move out of town following the destruction of his airship being destroyed, Stephanie becomes visibly upset and assumes that Sportacus doesn't like LazyTown and, more specifically, doesn't like her and the rest of the kids. What Stephanie does not realize is that Sportacus fears for his own safety as an elf, an identity that is seen as harmful and dangerous in the universe that the fanfiction is constructed in. As she is one of the closest

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17 xByDefault, Chapter 37.

18 Victoria Leto DeFrancisco and Catherine Helen Palczewski, "Alternative Approaches to Understanding Gender/Sex," *Communicating Gender Diversity: A Critical Approach*.



children to him in *LazyTown*, it seems fitting that Sportacus would choose to reveal his elven identity with her to help her understand his desire to leave.

“But, I still don’t get it” she said. ‘Why do people not like you?’

That was a complex list of reasons, but could be distilled into the most fundamental. Somewhat. ‘Old wives’ tales and prejudices,’ Sportacus said... ‘People fear the unknown, it’s always been that way’<sup>19</sup>.

The parallels between Sportacus being forward with his elven background in the fanfiction’s reality and “coming out” to identify as anything other than heterosexual or cisgender in our reality glare through the text. This instance serves as a jumping off point for readers as the narrative uses Sportacus’ identity as both an elf and as a gay man to illustrate the difficulties of deviating from societal norms in a fictional text that resonate in real-world situations.

Sportacus’ elven identity is not a singular occurrence within the text, as it is also mentioned in his interactions with Robbie. It should be prefaced that the interpretation of elves within the fanfiction’s universe is that of having super-human skills and strengths as Sportacus in the television show is shown to be capable of feats that are humanly impossible. In one instance in *Definition of Insanity*, Sportacus performs a gravity-defying trick in front of Robbie, to which Robbie responds by calling him a “crazy” elf. Sportacus’ reaction demonstrates the impact that such a term used to identify himself is used with a seemingly negative connotation.

“Robbie was well aware of what he’d done, Sportacus knew. After all, Robbie had once called him ‘the blue elf’ with the full intent to upset him. And now used it as a derogatory remark once again.

‘I’m an elf and I take pride in that,’ Sportacus said. ‘But don’t say it like a slur again’<sup>20</sup>.

Considering the use of Sportacus’ elf identity in a fanfiction plot, it is clear that the parallels between his magical background and his sexuality ultimately shed light on the hegemony under radical feminism. Rather than to hit it on the nose directly and speak on the misfortunes that Sportacus has had as a gay man, xByDefault makes use of the elven identity to indirectly speak on his sexuality by a similar yet different means. Sportacus’ elven identity, and its parallels to homosexuality, help to repeal the hegemony that not only exists within the fanfiction’s narrative but also the real world it is inspired by. The perspective of a group marginalized for their magical background and, by extension, their sexuality,

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19 xByDefault, “Definition of Insanity,” Chapter 18.

20 xByDefault, “Definition of Insanity,” Chapter 25.

gives voice to the queer experience. Through a radical feminist perspective, fanfictions like “Definition of Insanity” draw attention to individuals and circumstances that are arguably ostracized by the heteronormative society.

There is evidence to suggest that fanfiction not only liberates women, but also those who fall under the queer umbrella. As suggested through a methodology that includes the concepts of escapism, gender as a performance, and radical feminism, it is clear that fanfiction is not simply a tool for expressing a writer’s thoughts and emotions. Rather, it serves as an instrument of self-expression which elevates voices that are silenced in the heteronormative societies that exist today. Despite being more progressive than decades prior, modern society has yet to reconcile the fact that gender expression and sexuality exist in multiplicity, and are not restricted to only cisgender straight people. Fanfiction is often overlooked and is often dismissed as having little to no impact on the “real world.” This is false, as it provides a facet of expression for those who are unable to do so in the public sphere. Through the methodology and analyses conducted in this paper, it can be asserted that fanfiction allows readers and writers to be authentic within the private sphere of fanfiction and the internet culture that may be intertwined with it. Media like LazyTown provides a baseline for those who are looking to explore their own expression and to supply for others a way to see themselves reflected, and as media continues to grow so will the fanfiction content — even if that means writing about sports elves flipping around and cliché villains.